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ABSTRACT

Asserting that children who are exposed to a rich variety of literary experiences at home are far more likely to enter school ready to learn than those not exposed, this booklet for parents and caregivers discusses 10 guidelines to help them promote literacy in young children. The guidelines are: (1) talk and sing with your child; (2) read to your child every day; (3) provide materials that prepare your child for writing; (4) limit television viewing and watch appropriate shows with your child; (5) provide opportunities for play and exploration; (6) be a role model by showing your love of reading; (7) visit libraries and bookstores; (8) give your child a healthy start; (9) select quality child care; and (10) instill a life-long love of reading. (EV)

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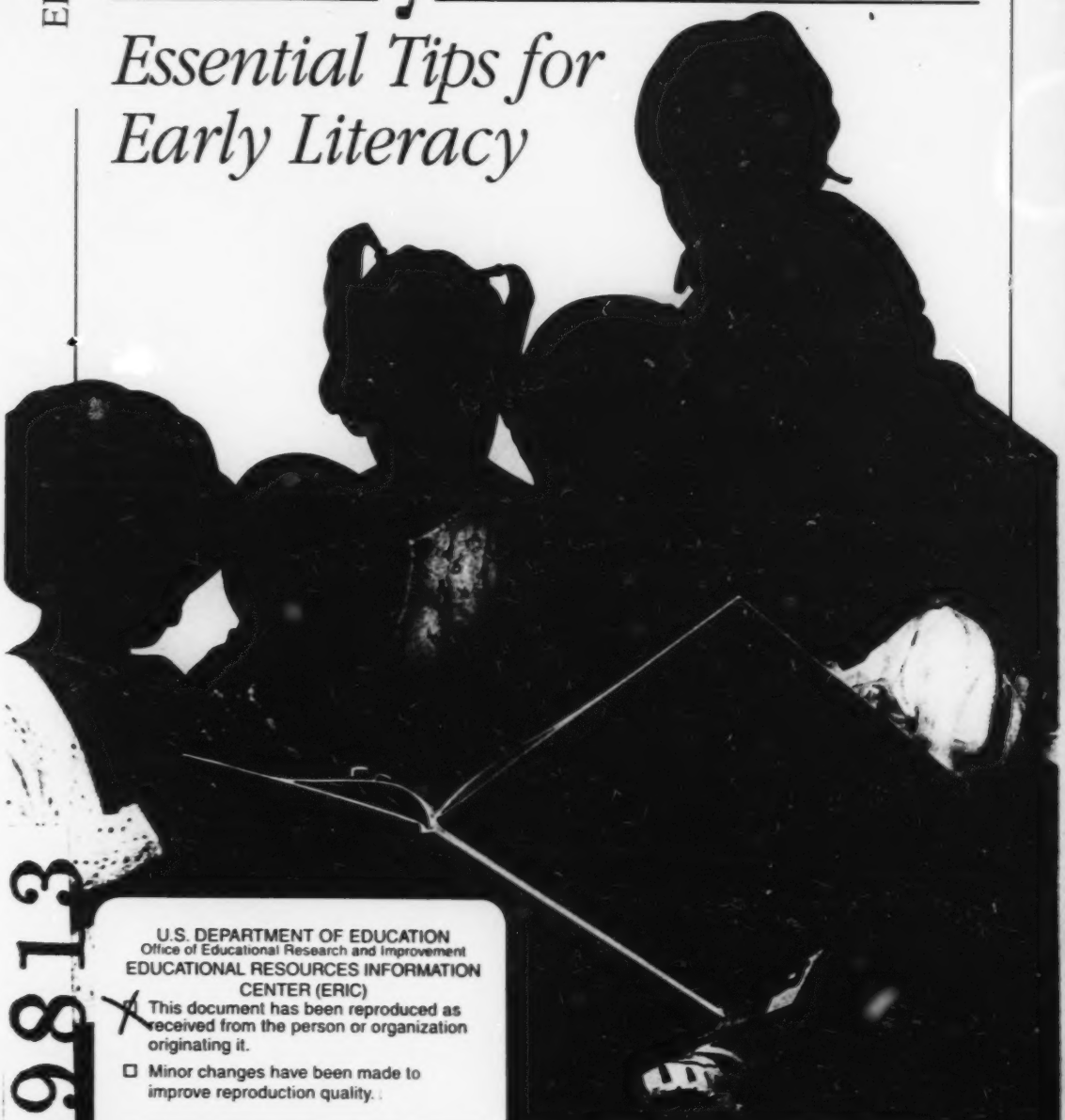
Ready To Learn

Essential Tips for Early Literacy



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The first years last forever

As parents and caregivers, we know how important it is to provide loving, predictable, and stimulating environments for our children from the time they are born. But many of us don't realize how important all this is to a child's eventual success in school. When you hold a young child and read to her, the emotional closeness and language experiences you provide are an important part of preparing her to learn when she is old enough for school. It is the foundation for her education.

Babies build their literacy skills by hearing lots of words, so talk to your children, right from birth. Look in their eyes, listen to their coos and babbles, and engage them in "conversations." Sing them nursery rhymes and silly songs. Make up stories for them.

And whenever you can, hold them close and share a book with them. Let them feel your love for reading - and your love for them. The first years last forever.

Rob Reiner

Ready, Set, Read! Reading Readiness Starts Now!

As a parent or caregiver, you are the most important person in your child's life. You have the ability to help your child get a good start at being a successful learner. More specifically, you can help your child become literate, or help her to learn to read, write, speak, and listen well. While many think that education begins when a child starts kindergarten, there are many ways you can help your child develop the skills she'll need for reading and writing long before she starts school. Children who are exposed to a rich variety of literary experiences at home are far more likely to enter school ready to learn, read, and write. And reading and writing are critical to future success in life. But it's not all about success. Reading is fun and opens up whole new worlds for a child by stimulating her thinking and imagination. And what's more, helping your child learn can bring you and your child closer together.

Here are ten important guidelines to help parents and caregivers promote literacy in young children.

1. Talk and sing with your child
2. Read to your child every day
3. Provide materials that prepare your child for writing
4. Limit television viewing and watch appropriate shows with your child
5. Provide opportunities for play and exploration
6. Be a role model by showing your love of reading
7. Visit libraries and bookstores
8. Give your child a healthy start
9. Select quality childcare
10. Instill a life-long love of reading

Talk and sing with your child

Infants learn to talk by hearing people talk to them. They are communicating with you from the very beginning. So when your baby coos and babbles, you should talk back with simple, loving words. While you may not think that she understands what you are saying to her, she needs to hear the sounds that make up your words and the speech patterns you use. Smiles and other facial expressions are good forms of communication too. Make up songs with your child's name in them, and sing lullabies and nursery rhymes to her.

Communication with your infant can be a part of everyday activities. For example, talk with him as you are feeding, dressing, and bathing him. Identify his body parts and point out household objects. Point out things in your neighborhood and talk about sounds that you hear in your home or as you are walking outside. You may ask, "What was that? Was that a dog barking? What sound does the dog make?"

Have books everywhere—bedrooms, bathrooms, living rooms and kitchens—there's always time to look and read.

When your child gets older and starts to point to things and ask questions, answer them all in clear, simple language. Listen and respond in a way that shows you are truly interested in what she has to say. If you speak more than one language in your household, speak them both to your baby. Every language has its own unique sounds and rhythms. A child can learn more than one language.

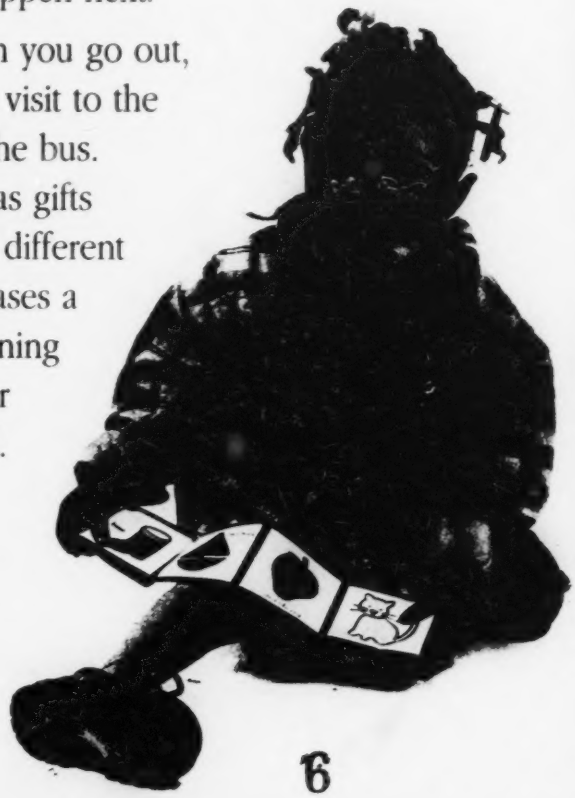
Read to your child every day

Rub a dub, dub, have fun in the tub! Make bath time magic with soft squishy bath books!

2 Begin reading to your child in infancy. Start with cloth or board books with colorful, simple pictures. Cuddle your baby in your lap as you look at books together. You don't even need to read a story – you can just talk about the pictures. Even if a baby doesn't understand the words you use, she feels the connection with you. So be animated when reading – change your voice and have fun with the story. Read stories about things you know your child likes – like animals, trucks, or dinosaurs. When your child is older, you can start storytime by looking at the book cover and asking what she thinks the story might be about. Let her help with the story if she wishes. Ask her questions like, "What do you think will happen next?"

Carry books with you when you go out, such as when you go for a visit to the doctor, or when you take the bus. Buy books instead of toys as gifts for special occasions. Read different kinds of books – this increases a child's vocabulary, her listening and speaking skills, and her understanding of the world.

When reading to your preschooler, point out letters and words in the book, but don't push too hard.



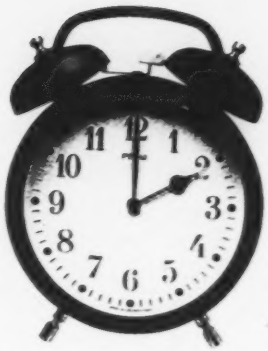
Pay attention to your child to see when he has had enough. If he appears fussy or uninterested, move on to another activity. But if your child wants to read a story, or a certain passage or page over and over and over again, read it! Even if he wants to skip pages, or go back and re-read something, go along with it. Children love the security of hearing favorite stories, especially when being cuddled. Being close to you is as important for literacy development as the words you read. So even when he is able to read on his own, you and he should still read together. Take pleasure in the one-to-one interaction during reading time.

Provide materials that prepare your child for writing

3 Babies start to develop the hand and finger muscles they will need for writing by holding toys. When your baby starts to grasp things, shake a rattle and then hand it to her to do the same. Give her safe household items that she can put together and take apart, like measuring cups. Give your toddler non-toxic crayons and large pieces of paper to draw on. Have her make marks on the paper and hang the "drawing" in the house for everyone to admire. Print your child's name under the picture and tell her, "This is Jenny's drawing."

Provide arts and crafts materials that help develop writing skills, such as paper, paints, markers, tape, crayons, and safe scissors for preschoolers. Encourage your child to explain what his various scribbles mean to let him

know you're interested. Finally, teach by example by letting your child see you writing – recipes, grocery lists, things to do, and letters to friends.



Limit television viewing and watch appropriate shows with your child

As a parent, you have the power to decide what your child should watch on television. With selective viewing, television can contribute to literacy. But parents must guide their children's viewing habits. Limit the amount of time children watch TV, and make sure you don't use it as a babysitter. Make a list of programs that are OK for her to watch in the time she is allowed. If you need help learning about appropriate programs, the library often provides information about suggested TV programs for children. Watch TV *with* your child – this gives her an opportunity to ask questions, clarify ideas, and make comments. Remember that children cannot receive feedback from television, and it can never be a substitute for loving communication with a parent or caregiver.

Board books are the perfect size for little hands and go everywhere you go!

Provide opportunities for play and exploration

A child learns about his world through play. When he is very young, play simple games together like peek-a-boo. When he is old enough, give him household items to play with, like pots and spoons. Or fill a small plastic bin with water and put different things for him to play with in the water. Use your

child's interests and age as a guide – if he doesn't want to play with a toy, it won't teach him anything, so you don't need to buy something just because it is labeled "educational." Materials that involve matching, sorting, and ordering by shape and color all support reading and writing skills. Toy people are good for dramatic play activities, as are handmade sock puppets. As your child grows older, involve him in activities that you do around the house. When you cook, let your child help you read the recipe and stir the ingredients. When you fold laundry, your child can help while you talk about the size, shapes, and color of the clothing.

Be a role model by showing your love of reading

6 The best way to express the importance of reading to your child is to demonstrate your own love of reading. Spend quiet time in which your child observes you reading. Point out to your child when you are doing things around the house that require reading and writing, such as cooking, shopping, or taking the bus. Be sure to provide a variety of reading materials in your home, and have a special place for them on a low shelf where your child can get to them easily.

Visit libraries and bookstores

7 Visit the library regularly in order to spark your child's interest in books. If you need help picking out appropriate books for your child, ask the librarian for suggestions. When your child is old enough to

print his own name, allow him to get his own library books. Libraries are great places to purchase used books that are often inexpensive and in excellent condition. Also, look for special events in libraries and bookstores when authors or storybook characters are a part of the program.

Give your child a healthy start

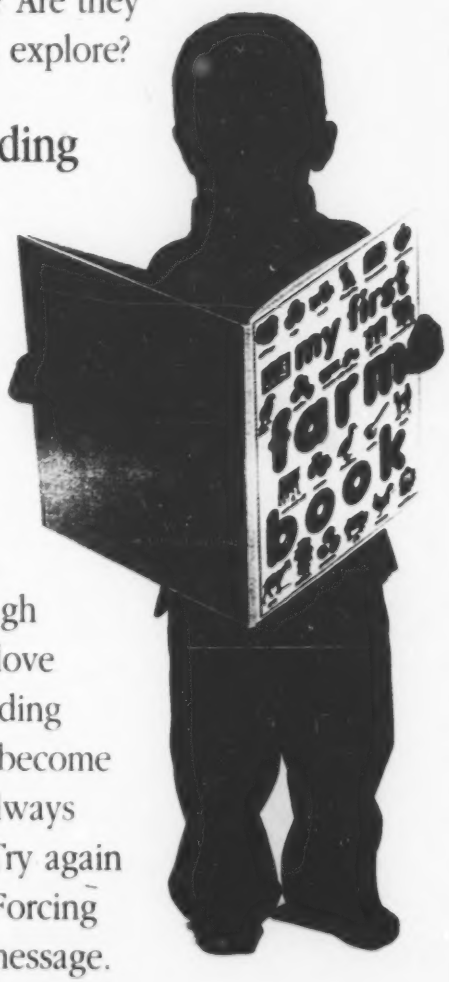
Q A healthy start begins with quality prenatal care. Infants whose mothers don't receive adequate care during pregnancy are more likely to be physically at-risk and restricted in their capacity to learn. A lack of prenatal care can hurt a child's ability to learn to read and write. After your child is born, ask a health care professional about proper immunization, nutrition, and safety for your baby. Immunizations protect your child from dangerous diseases; proper nutrition is very important for physical and mental development. Safety issues are also important. For instance, lead poisoning seriously affects a child's physical and intellectual development. Be sure your home is a safe place for your baby. Early screening to detect vision or hearing problems is also critical, since these problems can seriously affect a child's ability to hear and learn language.

Select quality childcare

9 Quality childcare can be a place to prepare your child for reading, so spend time with providers and ask questions about the children's activities throughout the day. Notice if books are around the facility, what the condition of the books and materials is, and ask if the provider takes the children to the library. You should ask the provider about the program's goals. Don't be impressed by a center that says they teach three-year-olds to read. Do be impressed if you are told that there are many activities that prepare children for reading and writing. Look for a provider that emphasizes communication and a "hands-on" approach to learning. Finally, look at the other children in the center. Do they appear happy? Are they free to talk and sing and play and explore?

Instill a lifelong love of reading

10 Parents can instill a love of reading in their children by fostering their literacy growth through everyday activities – not by teaching them to read from an early age. (Have a sense of humor when you read to your child – be silly sometimes and laugh with her.) Always show her your love and affection. Try not to force reading and writing activities, and do not become frustrated if your child does not always seem interested or is inattentive. Try again later – or wait until another day. Forcing a child to read sends the wrong message.



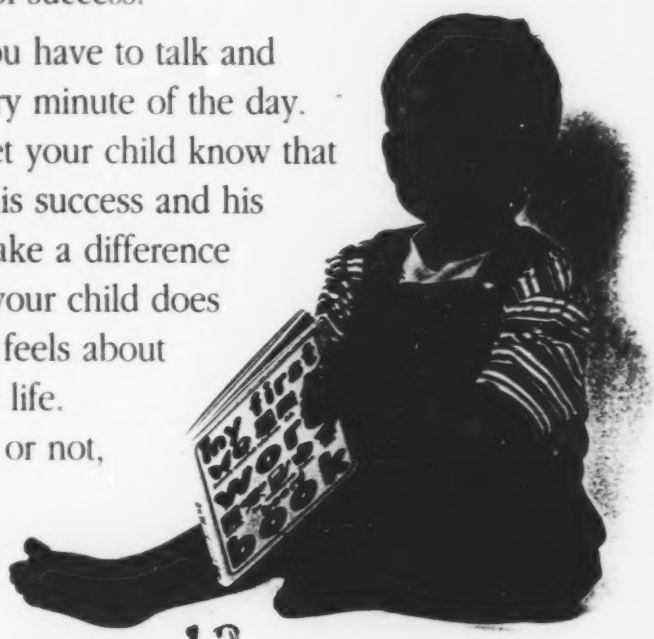
Whatever activities you do with your child, make it fun for both of you. A lifelong love of reading begins with children wanting to be read to and parents reading to them; children will soon be spending quiet time reading books on their own.

Throw a book in your diaper bag, store one in the car, and keep one in the stroller so no matter where you are, your child will have reading fun wherever she goes!

You are your child's first teacher

There are many ways you can be involved in helping your child with language and learning. But there are many more ways to promote literacy that are not discussed in this booklet. Be creative and come up with your own special ideas. By the time your child goes to school, she truly can be "ready to learn." And once she does go to school, stay involved in what she's learning. Your participation in her education will make a big difference in her school success.

But do not feel that you have to talk and read to your child every minute of the day. The main point is to let your child know that you are interested in his success and his happiness. You can make a difference not only in how well your child does in school, but how he feels about learning the rest of his life. Whether you realize it or not, you are your child's first teacher.



The first years last forever

"During the first years and months of life, children's experiences with language and literacy can begin to form a basis for their later reading success. Research consistently demonstrates that the more children know about language and literacy before they arrive at school, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading."

National Research Council's
1999 "Starting Out Right:
A Guide to Promoting Reading Success,"
published by the National Academy of Sciences

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